

The Radiant Child

Wexner Center screens documentary revealing an intimate portrait of Jean-Michel Basquiat

BY LIA EASTEP

If you've been considering becoming a member of the Wexner Center of the Arts but keep putting it off, now is an excellent time to take that leap. On September 30th, the Wex will screen Tamra Davis' new documentary *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child* as a members-only perk.

In 1983, graffiti artist-turned neo-expressionist painter Basquiat was at the height of his fame in the gritty, pre-Giuliani phase of lower Manhattan. At the same time, Davis was a 21-year-old film student working her way through college as a gallery assistant at the Ulrike Kantor Gallery in Los Angeles. The two met when her gallery featured an exhibition of his work.

"Everyone there was trying hard to get his attention," said Davis, "the gallery owners, the rich patrons, but he really just wanted to hang out with the young people, the assistants and our friends." The two bonded over their mutual love of cinema and what it meant to be an artist in the world, trying to make it happen.

Davis had bought a VHS cassette recorder. "It was super-new technology," she said with a laugh, which enabled her to "film constantly." Over the next two years, she shot footage of Basquiat as the two visited one another. When he died of a drug overdose in 1988 at the age of 27, the material went untouched for more than twenty years.

"It just never seemed like the right time," said Davis, remembering how her friend had felt hurt when he discovered people were capitalizing on his fame by selling off work he'd given as gifts.

Instead, she launched her career directing music videos for

bands like Depeche Mode and Sonic Youth, films including *Billy Madison* and *Half Baked* and episodes of *My Name is Earl* and *Grey's Anatomy*.

The opportunity to revisit the footage of Basquiat presented itself in 2006 while out on a walk with a friend who worked for Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Like many galleries at that time, MOCA was presenting a Basquiat retrospective. Upon discovering that there was almost no other footage of the artist at work, Davis made a 21-minute short. Enthusiastic responses led her to Sundance, where producer David Koh offered to finance a feature-length version of the material.

The film has received critical praise for both Davis' technical skill as well as her choice to minimize the tragic downward spiral of Basquiat's drug addiction in favor of his process and influence as an artist.

The feature-length documentary is made up of Davis' original material, as well as new interviews with the likes of Julian Schnabel, Fab 5 Freddy, Rene Ricard and Suzanne Mallouk. When asked the most surprising aspect of conducting new interviews, Davis said it was the clarity of the memories. "Jean-Michel made such an impact on people, that everyone remembered very vividly the moments when they met him." ■

Jean-Michel Basquiat: *The Radiant Child* will screen on September 30th in the Video/Film Theater of the Wexner Center for the Arts. More information about the film and acquiring membership can be found at www.wexarts.org.

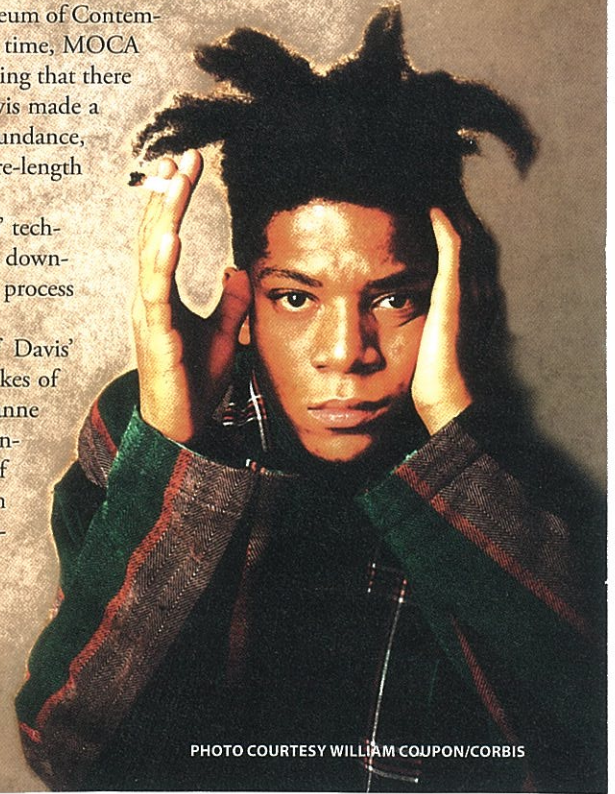


PHOTO COURTESY WILLIAM COUPON/CORBIS